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Source: *Anthropos*, Bd. 67, H. 1./2. (1972), pp. 196-208
Published by: Anthropos Institut
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40458022
Accessed: 26-06-2016 09:56 UTC

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A Tentative Model for Religion

MILTON JACOBS

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Prologue

"Since religion is a universal, it must have some value ... despite the immense variations in the outward observances, the inner glow and the function of religion in the group were identical from one form to the other. The Catholic priest, the Mormon missionary, the Eskimo shaman, the African witch-doctor, and the Protestant clergyman were all alike in their sense of inner conviction, in their intense desire to help others, and in their dependence upon some force outside themselves that gave them courage" (LOWIE 1963: 532).

"The Crow Indians and their neighbors continually amazed me by their ever-recurring face-to-face communication with the superhuman. It is such direct intercourse with the divine that is most distinctive of religion at its peak" (LOWIE 1963: 536).

"(As one informant put it:) All who had visions were well-to-do; I was to be poor, and that is why I had no vision" (LOWIE 1963: 537).

To present another flurry of words about religion, its origins, and its significance to the study of man, an author must be audacious or mad. No matter how generous I have tried to be about most scholarly works on religion, I must admit that the explanations, theories, and arguments leave me dissatisfied. Being an optimist, I hope that new analyses of religion – if done with some depth and imagination – may shed light on the phenomenon as well as adding some small insight into man's nature.

There are adequate recitals of previous scholarly treatments on religion. Reproducing another here would certainly be superfluous. Nor is it my intention to present endless citations from a vast literature to support my contentions.

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The purpose of this brief paper is straightforward – to develop a model of religion based on logic and selected references to the literature to illustrate the points of my argument.

Basically, I intend to demonstrate that religion – at least in its origins – depends upon the interrelationships between the concept or meaning of death [1], particularly in terms of a life-death dichotomy [2], and the dyad-triad structural or sociological concomitants of affective human relationships, warmth, and security. It would seem that man has gained or added to his understanding of death, of the dividing line between life and death, and of the interconnectedness of life and death through the mechanism of the dream as the play and souls, spirits, and ghosts as the players.

My hope is that the contents of this paper will stimulate a new round of discussion about religion. Sometimes setting up the target means new and possibly more fruitful intellectual movement will be forthcoming.

1. Death

It is difficult for me to associate any pleasantness with death [3]. I speculate that even the most unsophisticated of peoples shudder at the thought or prospect of death. Thinking back to early man, I believe that he would have been impressed both with the beginning of life – the birth of a child – and with the end – death. I cannot imagine that he would welcome death. The concept of an after-life or reincarnation would not, to my mind, make death beautiful or acceptable. The juxtaposition of birth and death has one outcome to me – birth would have to be seen as wonderful and would be anticipated joyfully while death would have to be feared and delayed [4].

RUTH UNDERHILL (1965) describes the range of ideas and practices concerning death among American Indians. She mentions that the Hopi considered death

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[1] "Religion is also a natural defense against man's knowledge that he must die" (OSTOW and SCHARFSTEIN 1954: 23).

[2] An illustration of the life-death dichotomy or polarity is the Taoist principle of *duong* or light, the male principle associated with living things, in opposition to *am* or dark, the female principle associated with death (HICKEY 1964: 65).

[3] FREUD (1947: 263) writes that man displays "an unmistakable tendency to shelve death, to eliminate it from life ... to hush it up ... that our own death is unimaginable!"

[4] LÉVI-STRAUSS (1967: 18) in his short paper about the four Winnebago myths also talks of oppositions – life and death. He writes that "if one wants a full life, one gets a full death; if one renounces life and seeks death, then one increases the full life of his fellow-tribesman, and moreover, secures for oneself a state composed of an indefinite series of half lives and half deaths." It would seem that the person who dies prematurely provides more life stuff to those he left behind. – Opposition can also be seen in WAGLEY's (1968) article on the Tapirapé shaman. The shaman functions as an agent of life in that he is said to bring a child to a woman (responsible for the pregnancy but not in the biological sense) (628) and as an agent of death, illness, and misfortune through his sorcery (625). Shamans are also connected to the culture heroes of the Tapirapé (624). A shaman is both a source of good and evil (628).

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a bad thing (80) and that some tribes felt that the dead were capable of doing harm to the living (81). On the other hand, the Sioux didn't fear death and considered the dead their companions (78, 79). To the Pueblo, the abode of the dead is a blessed place (80). I feel that the Sioux and Pueblo concepts of death and the dead do not necessarily mean that they viewed death positively and welcomed it. It could be argued that the fear of death and the dead prompts a search for more palatable explanations. The Kwakiutl experience is a case in point: to them death was an insult that had to be wiped out not by avoidance of the dead but by glorifying them; they could not accept grieving in solitude so they went on headhunting expeditions (60–62); they could not accept death as finality so they invented an afterworld and had the dead reborn as infants (70).

Among the Mescalero Apache, death was considered "the ultimate foe and its triumph was not to be celebrated"; funerary rites were absent and talk of the dead was repressed (OPLER 1969: 25). To the Kiowa Apache, death is also a traumatic experience connected with dark forces and requiring ritual defenses. The ghost of the dead relative led the dying to the afterworld. Death in the form of the corpse was polluting and rendered a locality unclean and dangerous. "Evil tendencies" somehow are in the background of a ghost. It was the Shaman who controlled ghosts and owls and sickness (OPLER and BITTLE 1967).

CLYDE KLUCKHOHN (1962: 135, 136) concerned himself particularly with the conception of death among the Southwestern Indians. He finds significant the general observation that death and the dead are treated ritually and interprets these rites as much more than affectionate ceremonial farewells. Behind these rites, he finds the premise that death is not the end of life. Or to put it another way, man refuses to admit the possibility that it is the end. In fact, he points out that the Soviet Union is the first major culture to announce the finality of physical death. KLUCKHOHN views funerals and funerary rituals as activities to heal the psychological wounds of the dead person's kin and to protect the living against the malignant powers of the dead. KLUCKHOHN sees death as disruptive to the surviving individuals, the family, and the society. Somehow, something must be done to reintegrate these living beings after death intervenes. So we see that death and the fear of death can be viewed as the factors behind establishing an ideology and associated rituals. Doesn't such a sum of factors approximate religion? LOWIE in his "Primitive Religion" (1948: 185) writes about fear creating the gods alongside the divine beings (among the Romans).

To the Kuria of East Africa, death is not a culmination or end of a sequence; the death ritual is not a rite of passage but a rite of circumstance (RUEL 1968: 641).

We have looked at the meaning of death and the reactions of various Indian tribes and other preliterate peoples. What does it mean to contemporary Americans of European origin? In ANDERSON's study (1964: 190–217), death is found to be the most frequently reported area of stress and intrudes upon old age, the middle years, and even childhood. The question is: What can man do to plan for the future when death is his constant companion?

GEERTZ (1966: 14, 15) claims that to explain people's religious beliefs as

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attempts to bring anomalous events or experiences (i. e., deaths, dreams, mental fugues, volcanic eruptions, or marital infidelity) within the realm of the potentially understandable "seems to smack of Tyloreanism or worse." I think that his judgment is too harsh. My view is that the conception of and reaction to death must be considered a major variable contributing to religious origins and development.

2. Dreams, Souls, Spirits, and Ghosts

Let me start this section with the words of OSTOW and SCHARFSTEIN (1954: 23): "The fear of death is counteracted by the ideas of souls, ghosts, and spirits."

Dreams and the Soul. – I am suggesting that at least a portion of man's solution to the problem of death has been worked out through his experiencing of dreams and his interpretations of their meaning. There is no need for me to substantiate the importance of dreams and its universality. Both points are too well known and accepted to require mention here.

Perhaps, some insight relative to dreams would emerge from an examination of the phenomenon among nonwestern societies.

To the Tapirapé of Brazil, the dream is the source and arena wherein the shaman obtains his powers, interacts with spirits, and protects his people (WAGLEY 1968: 622, 628).

WALLACE (1958: 234–248) reports on the French Jesuits' observations of the meaning of dreams among the Iroquois in the 17th century. The Seneca, according to the Jesuits, looked to dreams to give them guidance for life (235). Basic to the Seneca interpretation of dreams was the soul which inhabited the body and which encompassed a number of vital functions, such as animating the body, having capacities to knowledge, to wish or desire, and to leave the body during dreams or after death (237). Thus, the Iroquois have made a number of critical connections: 1. the content of dreams have a direct impact on the living; 2. relating the soul to dreams; 3. relating the soul to death; and 4. allowing the soul movement of its own. Further, the Iroquois distinguished between two types of dreams: 1. symptomatic dreams which express the wishes of the dreamer's soul and 2. visitation dreams which brought a supernatural being who promised to be a friend and patron to the dreamer (241, 244). Dreaming was considered so life-related to the Iroquois that they were given the fruits of their dreams by their fellows and they rejoiced that their souls were satisfied. WALLACE reports that the Iroquois faith in dreams, although somewhat diminished, has endured into the twentieth century (236).

Dreams to the Moroccan are interpreted as presages of the future (LEGEY 1926: 210) and as the means by which saints communicate with the dead (LEGEY 1926: 211). And obviously the living pray to the saints. The connection is made!

The Senoi of Malaya have developed a theory of dreams that can be explained on the basis of opposition: anxiety dreams (e. g., falling, dying, hostile dream characters) are interpreted in positive ways (STEWART 1969: 162–166).

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An interesting point is that WALLACE (1966: 52) in his book on religion states that a premise of every religion is that souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist.

Other societies – the Hopi (UNDERHILL 1965), the Gururumba (NEWMAN 1964), the Aymara (CARTER 1968), the Jivaro (HARNER 1962), to name a few, saw the relationship between death and the soul. There are, of course, variations in interpretation but that is expected. RAYMOND FIRTH (1960: 302) writes that "primitive" peoples are more concerned with the fate of souls in their own society than with the fate of the world; he also states that the soul – its creation, and finally its resting place – is tied in with the framework of ideas about the state of a society (331).

HARNER's (1962: 258–272) description and analysis of the concept of the soul among the Jivaro is highly detailed and complex. For our purposes, the presence of three souls, each having definite purposes and functions, is critical (260). The *arutam Wakan I* is the particular soul which produces visions of extremely short duration. Through the *arutam* soul, the Jivaro seek security from the always present menace of death. So, again, the Jivaro make the important connections so relevant to our argument: the soul with visions (or dreams) and the soul with death (267).

The Moroccan also connects the dreams of the dead with its soul (LEGEY 1926: 162).

CARTER's (1968) treatment of Aymara death also lends support to our argument. The Aymara believe in four souls – *ajayu, jañayu, caraye,* and *ánima* – which appear in the forms of persons (246). Upon death, the souls reside in another world and remain there if properly treated by their earthbound relatives. To avoid visitations of vengeful souls, All Soul's Day must be celebrated to feed and to commemorate the departed (245). If the living loses a soul, he becomes ill (246).

Death, the concept of souls, and funerary doctrine and ritual are highly interrelated among the Aymara (258–259). CARTER points out that the Aymara's concepts and practices are not unique but are replicated among simpler societies all over the world. Important to note is his mention of Mitla where man worships the souls of his kinsman – not souls in general (258–259).

Although more will be made about this point later, CARTER connects the relationship between man and the soul of his kin with the peasant world view as exemplified in the dyadic contract, fatalism, concept of the limited good, and valuation of conspicuous giving (259).

The Gururumba of New Guinea also have a belief in a vital essence (*GwondEfoJE* = one's reflection) which has function and movement. It leaves the body during sleep and death occurs with its permanent loss (NEWMAN 1964). The vital essences, ghosts, and ancestors are related with one another and connected with living individuals (259).

In HOLMBERG's (1950) famous monograph on the Siriono of Bolivia, connections are made among death, dreaming, souls, and evil spirits: 1. in dreams the absence of wandering of the soul is established; 2. if a man has not abided by the customs, his soul after death may develop into an evil spirit

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(invisible or visible) who can bring about sickness and death; 3. a man who has abided by custom is a good man and will after death have a soul who can be beneficent and can aid the sick (90–92).

Spirits, Ghosts, and Ancestors. – FORTUNE (1934: 1) in his study of Manus religion practically explains the model in his ethnographic data that I am proposing. The Manus man, it seems, worships his father, not the Father in Heaven, but the ghost of his deceased father. The skull of the deceased father is placed in the rafters over the entry of the house. The skull symbolizes the spiritual essence which guards the house (and its occupants) and supervises the morals of its people.

"The Manus honor a ghostly father, never a ghostly grand-father, saying that Sir Ghosts deserve to become anonymous and dishonored when they fail to protect their souls from death." Sir Ghost, the dead father, punishes, forgives, inflicts sickness, but above all he never inflicts death. So the dreaded outcome death produces the Sir Ghost who protects his son from death (2). But the Sir Ghosts of neighboring houses can inflict death on those outside their own homes.

Although I have not made the point elsewhere, ancestor worship prevalent in Africa and Asia (LOWIE 1948: 174, 175) establishes the network between the living and the dead – the ancestor – as the fabric of religion. HORTON (1960: 673) writes that traditional African religions "recall the Christian experience of communion with a loving God although the African communion is often associated with lesser spirits (e. g., ancestors) than with the supreme being".

Now to look at spirits, ghosts, and animal spirits in a comparative way. WHITING and CHILD (1953) data on childhood training practices and various kinds of socialization anxiety allows us to compare various kinds of fear. An analysis of a sample of 39 societies provides the following ranking:

Highest fear:	spirits	I	Lowest fear:	animal spirits	IV
	men	II			
	ghosts	III			

There is a correlation between high fear of spirits and high fear of men. In addition the summation of the four fears can be dichotomized into high and low fear; the ratings on sexual socialization anxiety can also be so dichotomized. Correlating the high-low fears with high-low sexual socialization anxiety, we find them highly associated. This would indicate some connection between the real world and the world of spirits.

The low ranking for the fear of animal spirits probably can be explained by the closeness of and adaptation to nature of the many preliterate societies in the WHITING and CHILD sample.

The similarities in the rankings of fear of spirits and of men might indicate that the fear in the real world is transposed into the spirit world. Ghosts are often relatives of men and thus less to be feared than either strange men or strange spirits.

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3. The Significance of Group Size and Insecurity

Many scholars have remarked about the relationship between the size of groups and the kinds of possible interactions as well as the differentials of cohesion and affect. To remind the reader of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, of primary and secondary groups, of kin and nonkin seems so elementary. Yet, the point that must be made is that a great deal of variance in behavior, attitudes, and values can be explained on the basis of the size of the group. An interesting point in this regard is PARSONS' and BALES' (1955: vii) statement that the dynamics of any small group closely resembles the dynamics of the family.

The essence of my concern is this: if we are considering such characteristics of human interaction as warmth, security, and protection, then the small family unit is designed and functions to provide these characteristics [5]. Further, when we emphasize the early years of the infant and child, the unit providing warmth, security and protection may be limited to the Mother-Child dyad or possibly the Mother-Child-Father triad.

To buttress what I have said about the nature of the dyad-triad, RUBEL and KUPFERER (1968) and PIKER (1968) make reference to the fact that in many peasant societies the nuclear family or certain patron-client relationships or special friendships are the only foci for trust, cooperation, and warmth. It is so in the "real world"; it is also so in the "projected world" of dreams and souls in my opinion. HAMBURG (1967: 427) makes a general statement that parallels our concern for the small group and its correlate of warmth and security:

> "From the standpoint of the individual, the greatest satisfaction and fulfillment come from relations with the biologically essential few. Even if we colonize a planet, the development of an infant there will depend on the presence of another person, – a mother, to hold, to love, to give security, to train for the problems ahead. Conquest of the outer world does not free the species from the inner world which made its evolution possible. Social life is rooted in emotion and is basic to survival. A comprehensive human biology must surely take account of one of man's fundamental properties – his social nature."

4. Group Size and Dreams

What about the peopling of one's dreams? Does man generally dream about large or small groups of people? Who are the people in his dreams?

The little data that we have point to dreams containing small numbers of people – often just one person – who are frequently the dreamer, members of the dreamer's family, either living or dead.

In the study by GRIFFITH, MIYAGI, and TAGO (1958: 1193–1199), the dreams of Japanese and American college students revealed that better than half of both groups saw dead persons in their dreams and about a third saw themsel-

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[5] HALL (1968: 16) argues that if primary affectional factors, primary sexual motivation, protection-seeking, and protection-giving were the only ones determining size, structure, and existence of relatively constant groups of primates, we should expect to find rather small groups.

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ves as dead. Dead persons were seen as living and loved persons were seen as dead. In the classifications of dream content, the mention of seeing large groups of people seems less prominent as compared to those referring to single individuals or small groups. VAN EEDEN (1969) collected 500 of his own dreams and made an attempt at the analysis of dreams. His taxonomy, although interesting, is not relevant to this paper. What is relevant is that most of his dreams contained 1. one person, often the dreamer; 2. the dreamer and a dead relative; 3. the dreamer and a demon who was either a man or a woman. Nowhere in his article does VAN EEDEN refer to dreams heavily peopled. I assume that these statements are important to our discussion.

DEVEREUX's (1969) intensive study of a Plains Indian veteran provides an impressive amount of dream data to examine. Twenty dreams are mentioned; of these 10 refer to 4 actors in the dreams; 4 refer to two actors in the dreams; 8 refer to larger groups but the dreamer actually interacts with one or two persons. The large group seems to provide the setting. Looking at the dreams in another way, about 25% of the actors mentioned in the 20 dreams were not close to the dreamer. The major proportion of the descriptions of the dream cast indicates that they were intimate or close to the dreamer.

CALVIN HALL (1966), the psychologist, has devoted much of his research to the dream. He writes that in 15 out of 100 dreams, the dreamer is the sole character; in the other 85 dreams, there are on the average two characters in addition to the dreamer. Also, according to HALL, the dreamer's family constitutes a fairly high percentage of dream characters (28).

My own memory of dreams is that I seldom visualize large numbers of people. If I may make a wild speculation, I would say that most dreaming contains fearful sequences [6] and a small rather than large dramatis personae. The juxtaposition of these two characteristics I find extremely suggestive – that the solution to a fearful situation can only be accomplished in a small family-like social constellation like the dyad-triad I have already mentioned.

5. Conclusions

The arguments presented would suggest that FREUD's bogeyman (civilization) is the non-group, the larger group outside the family or, perhaps, beyond the triad and dyad that I have just mentioned. I could easily imagine the polarities involved: the infant loved, petted, fed, swaddled, cradled in his small dyadic or triadic world as opposed to the child in jolting, sometimes bruising, competition with siblings, playmates, schoolmates, and strange adults.

Where there is fear, unfamiliarity, voids without road signs or landmarks, would not man yearn for the forms, feelings, sounds, and signs of his original dyad or triad? With the horror of death to reconcile so that life can go on,

[6] EGGAN (1961: 569) in her analyses of 254 Hopi dreams at the manifest level found 305 elements of persecution, conflict, or physical or moral danger and 260 elements of security support.

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would not man project a dyadic or triadic – or in other words a close kinlike relationship with souls and with actors in dreams? I think that he would! And doesn't a materialization of such projections into the real world form the substance of religion?

KLUCKHOHN and others would agree with a statement claiming that man seeks reason and explanation for fearful phenomena through some human-like agency, either natural or supernatural and that practically everything that happens is mediated through the parents or their substitutes. OSTOW and SCHARFSTEIN (1954: 77) also write about the relation between God and parents; perhaps, they say God is our Father in heaven.

SPIRO (1966: 121) puts my argument in terms of structural and motivational variables. His motivational variable, I would argue, would be a way of handling death; his structural variable would be the family ... what I have labeled the dyad-triad. Of course, the terms – family or dyad-triad – reflect the essence of what I am trying to express. Formal religions to my mind provide the rationale (the meaning of death), the ways of behaving (propitiation and ritual) in the face of death, and the personnel who act as vehicles, intermediaries, or surrogates with the ultimate life source in order to ward off or make death less destructive. It is no accident that in the great religions, the titles of personnel are father, mother, brother, and sister; that God in Christianity and Judaism is referred to as Father; that the Holy Family in Christianity provides a channel to God; that in Buddhism, Buddha is referred to as Father Buddha and the Monkhood as the Brotherhood; that the Burmese Nat interacts with the living world through his Natwife. Is it not significant that the powerful Tapirapé shaman calls certain spirits his sons and that the spirits with which the shaman has positive relationship refer to him as father? (WAGLEY 1968: 623).

SPIRO and D'ANDRADE (1958: 456, 457) make several statements that are in agreement with my model of religion:

> "Belief systems are the creations of human fantasy. ... fantasies ... represent the child's perceptions of ('hypotheses' concerning) his world ... derived from his early socialization experiences. Conceptions of supernatural beings correspond to and are projections of the child's parental (or parental surrogate) imagos. Rituals — techniques for interacting with and influencing the supernaturals — correspond to and are generalizations from modes of interaction used by children to influence their parents."

TURNER's (1968: 576, 577) brief but incisive article on myths seems to provide the mirror image, albeit not a perfect one, for our model of religion. Somehow, his interpretation must be viewed in these terms: some sacred power or life source sends out culture heroes who are capable of bringing about transition or change from chaos to cosmos or from immortality to mortality. Implicit, of course, is the function of culture heroes in peopling a particular life space. TURNER also makes reference to the criticality of the dyad-triad by stating that in the protracted liminal periods signified by the myth, complex social structural characteristics are replaced by dyadic oppositions of instructors and instructed (belonging to collective rites). He is referring in the last statement to the ritual connected to the acting out of myths and not to the substance of the myths themselves. I, nonetheless, find the shifting

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from complex social structures to simple dyadic ones very significant given the full context of the myth and its meaning to the people who believe in it.

Circularity is often considered a weakness in scientific thinking. Cause and effect has a better ring. However, in dealing with man, circularity, feedback, and redundancy seem to explain certain phenomena. I think that it is the case here.

Myth [7] seeks to explain the origin of man or the line of men by having a sacred power, let's call it the ultimate life source, delegate these functions to culture heroes (often one or two). Where there is nothing, the myth explains creation or life. Somehow in the transition between nothing and life, the agents, either human or mythical, are few in number. In fact, it seems that agent-agent or human-agent interactions or dyadic interactions are involved "in the beginning". Could this mean that when we are dealing with creation – a process so sacred, so supernatural, that its complexity and wonderment can only be accomplished by the interaction of the ultimate life source and the dyad of agents, the culture heroes?

Religion [7] takes man from his birth through a span of life and protects him from death or reduces the probability of death or explains death in a palatable fashion by establishing a relationship between man and the opposite of death (what I have called the ultimate life source) by means of special agents, intermediaries, or religious personnel. Again, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, could it be that when we are dealing with a process so sacred, so supernatural, that its complexity and horror can only be handled by the interaction of the ultimate life source and the dyad-triad of agents, like the souls, ancestors, spirits, and specially trained religious personnel?

With poetic licence, I would explain that religion celebrates birth and life by connecting it with the sacredness of the ultimate life source and somehow dilutes the fear of death by showing man's eternal connections with or possible reaching toward the ultimate life source.

HORTON's (1960: 202) explanation of religion approximates in part a major point that I have tried to make in this paper: " ...religion is an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of human society".

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[7] HORTON (1968: 673) in his discussion of African religion may be addressing in a somewhat different fashion what I have said about religion and myth above. He writes: "Involving as it [African religion] does intense personal relationships with beings beyond the human social order the communion aspect of African religion tends to take people outside the daily round of visible and tangible experience. In this sense, it moves thought in the opposite direction from the explanatory aspect, which starts in the realm of the unobservable beings, and brings them to bear on visible and tangible things. Formally opposed though they are, these two aspects of religion are found intermingled in many African cultures. Nor is the tension between these two opposites always an unfruitful one; for in the shamans, prophets, and mystics of traditional religion, we see people who both pass out of the sphere of visible and tangible things in their communion, and also return from time to time with explanatory schemes which make sense of the visible and tangible world."

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It is death that puts us "beyond the confines of human society" but the fear of death, manifested and interpreted in our dreams and fantasies, provides the motivations for devising the religious systems which have at their roots primary relationships to the protective, warmth-providing, affect-producing social unit like the family (the dyad-triad) and secondary relationships to other social structural characteristics of the society in question.

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